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The Omniscient Being Knows

I am writing a book about the assumption of natural theology that we can discuss,

> the concept of God and His attributes in the light of reason without accepting as authoritative any claim to revelation.[1]

When will the book be done? The Omniscient Being knows.

I changed a familiar idiom to parody philosophers who avoid considering what may or may not be true of the God of revelation. The possibility of a conflict between necessarily infallible omniscience and free will interests them, and that problem does not seem to require that the 'being' ('person') with that omniscience be God. I also made the change because if I had said that God knows it, then I would only be expressing my frustration about how little progress I am making, without really saying or implying anything about God; whereas, by making the substitution I suggest that I know what the omniscient being knows, a suggestion that I think is funny. This paper tries to explain the joke.

Although the explanation takes the paper to explain, I can begin by asking how philosophers know what a being that is omniscient would know. The answer seems to be that as philosophers they know what the objects of knowledge are, and they know about generalizing: for these philosophers, omniscience is the knowledge of each and every truth (as true), including truths about the future. John Fischer explains this idea of omniscience by imagining a computer or very wise monk in Tibet who has stored in his memory or knows "all the truths about your life—past, present and future." Of especial interest is that he knows "what will happen throughout your life, including the minutest details."[2] As it happens the computer gets it right, but it might not do so; whereas, this cannot be true of a necessarily infallible being, which is what Fischer and others think God must be.

Fischer's suggestion that omniscience be defined in terms of (the knowledge of) truths about what will happen is not easy to understand. To see why I say this, consider some familiar references to knowing what will happen, where what is known seems to admit of a

truth-value. A child has been neglected and a social services agency does an intervention. The child's grandmother asks, despairingly, "What will happen (to the child)?" The question might be rhetorical, if she is just expressing her fears for the child's future. However, as I imagine it, she really wants to know what will happen. If she asks someone at the agency, the worker who responds may tell her about the steps that are taken in such cases. If she is surprised or taken aback, she may wonder out loud, "Is that true?" And someone familiar with how the agency works may reassure her that it is (not) true --the steps to be followed are (not) as the social worker described them. So, we seem to have a case of knowledge of (the truth about) what will happen.

However, the fact that the social worker (or an omniscient being) knows what these steps are (and somehow is infallible) and that what she knows is true does not provide the basis for deriving a conflict with free will. The social worker may claim that the agency's regulations do not allow her any leeway when it comes, for example, to returning the child to its mother. Here it is the fact that those at the agency who are responsible for the child's welfare are given little or no flexibility that raises questions about free will. Moreover, it still is possible for the procedures not to be followed, perhaps because of incompetence or the determination to do the right thing for the child. So, even though the worker knows what will happen, and even though it is true that it will happen, when we look back some time later we may find that what she said will happen did not actually take place.

Let me anticipate the objection that what the agency worker knows is not a truth about what will happen, but about what is *supposed* to happen if the agency follows its own rules. As I imagine it, the grandmother was not asking about that. Moreover, if the response she had gotten explicitly talked about what the agency is supposed to do in such cases, she would have had every reason to wonder whether the speaker was expressing skepticism or cynicism about whether the agency will do what its own rules require. In any event, since she did not ask about it, the response she got was not to a question she did not ask.

The grandmother, instead of asking what will happen, could have asked about what happens (to the child), and also have been told what steps or procedures the agency follows. So, it would be misleading to say, as I found myself wanting to say before I tried to imagine examples, that the philosopher's concern is not with what will happen but with what happens, where the latter has to do with what ends up happening.

The question of what happens also arises in connection with a story (movie or play). Here, too, the fact that we can say to someone that we know what will happen or what happens because we know the story is not significant when it comes to the free will of the characters in the story, but for a different reason. Consider that, for example, Theodore Dreiser depicts Sister Carrie as lacking free will because of the powerful forces acting on her. However, others authors do not depict their characters that way. So, the fact that someone does something in a story, and that what she does can be known by anyone familiar with the story, does not (by itself) imply that she lacks free will.

When it comes to a play the time frame within it should be distinguished from that of our own situation in watching it. I liken our temporal perspective in relation to the characters in the play to that of God in relation to our lives, at least according to a certain conception of God as outside of time or even timeless. And just as the free will of the characters in a play is not compromised because of our familiarity with the story, so our free will, it has been argued by Boethius and others, is not compromised by God's knowledge of what happens to us. That this conception of God is compatible with free will seems questionable, if it requires that we think of ourselves as characters in a story, at least as far as God is concerned. What interests me more, and I will return to later, is the inside/outside distinction as applied to God's relation to time.

Knowledge of truths about what will happen is not confined to knowledge of bureaucratic procedures. Someone who asks about what will happen may be wondering about the existence of a possible pattern of behavior for a certain person's relationships; a characteristic set of developments (for a certain disease); a certain set of motivations (for a child's behavior), or whether certain plans have been made (for a ceremony), or the like. In such cases, when told what will happen or what happens, the questioner may ask, "Is that true?" As I am imagining it, the question is about whether there really is such a pattern, set of motivations, etc. This explains why an observer may interject that it is not true because, for example, the pattern of behavior no longer exists because of therapy or a transforming experience. In such a case, as with a bureaucratic procedure, there is nothing to suggest that because the speaker knows what will happen or that what he knows is true, her knowledge presents any threat to free will.

Such a threat may be due to what was done to fix an outcome by bribery, extortion, blackmail, drugging, and any other underhanded method. "The Governor will appoint the Attorney General to the empty Senate seat," you say. "Is that true?" I ask. "Yes. It's in the bag." What you tell me is that the outcome has been fixed (because the Governor has accepted a bribe). Of course, the authorities might discover the fixing before the Governor has made the appointment, in which case a different appointment might end up being made. In any event, any threat to his free will is a function of what is known—that he has been bribed or is being coerced--not that it is known.[3]

The picture emerging of an omniscient being, as far as knowledge of future truths is concerned, does not include the features crucial to the development of a conflict between omniscience and free will. We have ended up with a being that knows all the minutest details of bureaucratic procedures; agendas for events; patterns in particular people's behavior, and the like. Fischer suggests that we liken the omniscient being to a computer, something we can do by imagining that all such procedures, agendas, patterns, etc. somehow have been programmed into it. We also might try to imagine that the computer also has been programmed with information about any tampering or 'fixing' that has been going on. However, the omniscient being, so understood, is not of interest to philosophers because the fact that it knows does not imply anything interesting about free will.

Although what interests philosophers are cases where the evaluation of something said about what will happen turns on what actually eventuates, there does not seem to be a place for a claim to know with such cases, and, if there is, then the object of knowledge does not seem to have a truth-value. This is most obvious with a guess, hunch, premonition or expression of cynicism. Jesse and Jane have had an on-again off-again relationship: dating, breaking up, getting back together, breaking up again, and now getting engaged. Will they really get married? Laila, a friend of theirs, says, "I don't know." And then adds, "But, if I had to guess, I would say that the marriage will not take place as planned." Another friend, Betty, may express herself more cynically, confidently or fearfully, and say that she knows what will happen. "I just know that they will not go through with the wedding." Or, if she is very confident about, she may claim to know what will happen and indicate that she is willing to bet on it. Someone on the scene may question whether she really does know, and, perhaps, with good reason. However, the guess, premonition, bet or cynical expression

would not be said to have been true when it was made. Unlike the other cases, the premonition may be said to have come true or come to pass (when it does). But, someone who wonders at the time Betty spoke whether what she said is true should be corrected and told that Laila has no inside information, and just has a premonition or is guessing or being cynical. After all, there is nothing else the person could be wondering.

This point also applies where the speaker says that he knows that the marriage will not take place because of what he knows of Jesse and Jane. His prediction may be a good one, given the soundness of his basis for it, even though it does not come true. But if it does come true, that does not mean that it was true when it was made. If anything, the fact that it came true means that it was not true before, as Aristotle seems to have understood.

Although we will have more to say about prophecy later, it is like a prediction in that the fact that the prophecy was fulfilled does not mean that it was true when it was made. This point has to be qualified when it comes to prophecy that comes from God, if there seems to be the suggestion that God is somehow going to manipulate or otherwise control the outcome. If so, then we have here another case where its being true when it was made is a function of the fact events have been 'fixed', and any suggestion of a constraint on free will comes from that fact and not its being the object of (omniscient) foreknowledge.

So, if we are to work with the definition of omniscience as the knowledge of all truths, then predictions or prophecies do not seem to be part of omniscience. Perhaps, omniscience should be redefined to include prophecies or predictions that always are fulfilled or come true. This suggestion will be considered later. However, it should be distinguished from what we are arguing here, namely, that no matter how successful the prediction or prophecy is, the person making it does not know something that is true when the prediction or prophecy was made.

Some philosophers will want to argue that we would not say that a prophecy or prediction was true when it was made because doing so would imply, perhaps, that the outcome had been fixed. This argument seems most appealing when it comes to the truths about the (unremarkable) past or present that Fischer and others think are known by an omniscient being. Consider, that a narrative of the unremarkable things I do would include references to things that would not be said to be true because they are so unremarkable.

These references are true. Or so the objection supposes. So, the fact that we would not say that they are true is a fact about their being remarkable and not about their truth.

The problem is that this point does not seem to be valid even for the unremarkable past. My family is having supper together, and I ask to have some vegetables passed to me. And the person closest to the platter does so. Is it true that she did so? Is what true? Perhaps, she passed them when she was not supposed to do so because of prior agreement; perhaps she usually does not respond to requests to pass food; perhaps someone is watching for her to pass the platter because it is a signal to turn out the lights. In each of these cases it seems clear what is true or not true. But, such cases are ruled out by the stipulation that the case is unremarkable. Of course, in telling the story I said that the vegetable platter was passed to me. However, I was telling the story of something unremarkable; I was not actually saying that she passed them to me, let alone that it was true that she did so. So, I have to think that it must be the philosopher who wants to tell us what is true, even though he is not actually saying or inviting us to imagine anyone saying that she passed the platter. And so, he must be assuming that he can somehow get what he devises or produced to actually say something (and be true). We will be returning to this suggestion about the crucial role played by the philosopher later. However, our real focus here is on the future, not the unremarkable past.

When it comes to a prophecy or prediction, to say that it was true when it was made implies, as I suggested earlier, that the outcome 'was in the bag'. However, by contrast with the narrative of what I did where the fact that I used the fork is included in the narrative, there is a problem, as we have seen, with understanding what is supposed to be true when the prophecy was made, if it is not about the fixing of the outcome. Here, too, the application of a truth-value to what would we are not to imagine anyone on the scene referring to that way involves the introduction of the voice of the philosopher, who is the one who is saying that it is true.

If we are to think about cases where someone knows what will happen and what she knows is true, then we seem to be left with the mysterious case of a soothsayer who claims to be seeing the future. I am not thinking of a psychic who claims, on the basis of a dream or crystal ball, to 'see' into the future because her claim depends on how she interprets the 'evidence', which, of course, leaves open the possibility that what she says will happen

does not come to pass. The case I have in mind, where such a possibility is not left open, is one where the soothsayer is supposedly actually seeing the future. “The agency is giving the child back to its mother.” “Is that true?” Presumably, the person asking this last question would not be asking whether the soothsayer really thinks that this is what the agency will do, based on her vision or dream; rather, what she is asking is whether that really is happening in the future.

So, if omniscience is supposed to have as its objects truths of this sort, their existence seems at least as problematic as any possible conflict between omniscience and free will. For one thing, there are questions about what the seer says she is seeing, such as how she (or her audience) can be sure what she is seeing. After all, what she says she is seeing may be ambiguous or subject to different interpretations. For another, we seem to have to assume that although the objects of the omniscient being’s knowledge are things yet to happen, nevertheless these things are truths because they really are happening. This consequence of our investigation into omniscience should be very disconcerting to anyone who thinks she knows what omniscience is because it presupposes that the future is in some sense already happening or has already happened. The obvious conclusion is that the omniscient being doesn’t have such knowledge, but then it is unclear how it has any knowledge of truths about what will happen which could constitute a threat to free will.

The obvious inference to draw from our discussion is that philosophers have something else in mind for truths than anything we have been considering. And, as Fischer and other philosophers make clear, when they think of what admits of a truth-value, what they have in mind are a *proposition* (*statement*, or the like). Unlike a prediction or prophecy, which comes true but is not true (when it was made), the proposition that is supposed to be what is predicted or prophesied is true (or false).

To identify the proposition that is the object of any of the things we have been discussing, we have only to formulate, the guess, premonition, prediction, prophecy, or the like, with a ‘that’ clause-- the proposition is what follows the ‘that’. If, for example, Betty guesses that the marriage of Dave and Mia will not take place as planned, then the proposition is ‘the marriage of Dave and Mia will not take place as planned’.

This introduction of the concept of a proposition seems to involve a puzzling distinction between the guess and its object, a point that applies to a comparable distinction, between,

the hunch, premonition, prediction, or prophecy, and its object. True we can talk about what the friend guesses by means of a 'that' clause. However, what follows the 'that' does not seem to be different from the guess. We could produce the proposition ourselves merely by writing it would or speaking it, but then it would be unclear what it had to do with the guess or even why it would actually say anything, let alone be true or false.

When it comes to the guess, a Fregean may want to distinguish between the attitude of hesitancy or lack of confidence, on the one hand, and the object of the attitude, the proposition, on the other hand. I am unclear why any attitude is involved when it comes to the guess, let alone why it is hesitancy (in making the guess?) or lack of confidence (why not a confident guess?). True, Betty is guessing what will happen; but how does that mean that she is adopting an attitude towards a proposition, especially when the proposition in question is an artifact of the analysis, i.e., something that is produced or devised by the philosopher to be the object of the attitude? I can write out the sentence "the marriage of Dave and Mia will not take place as planned'. But how do I get it to say or express something, if it is not to be understood as the guess, i.e., as what Betty actually said?

Some philosophers would want to explain what they have in mind for a proposition by citing the logical truth, for example, of "Either the marriage will go on as planned or it will not." What seems obvious to them is that, each disjunct is not a guess, hunch, premonition, prediction, prophecy, or any of the other things mentioned earlier. Rather, each is a proposition (as is the disjunction), and as such is either true or not true (false).

When I try to understand this (instantiation of a) so-called logical truth by imagining it to be actually said, I think of how a friend of the mother of the bride might respond when the mother expresses anxiety about the marriage actually taking place. "What will happen?" she asks the friend, who responds, "I don't know. But, I do know that there is nothing you can do about it. Either it will go on as planned or it will not." Significantly, for our purposes, neither disjunct is a guess, hunch, premonition, prediction, prophecy, or any of the other things that have been or could have been mentioned.

However, it does not follow that each disjunct is a proposition or that it has a truth-value; its very status as more than a grammatical disjunct is problematic. The friend is telling the mother not to worry about what will happen; she is not implying anything about what she would say will or will not happen with the wedding plans, in connection with

each grammatical disjunct. So, the analysis of what the friend said into a logical disjunction is misconceived.

Rather than have in mind what the friend said or, for that matter, anything anyone actually says, any instantiation of a logical truth is something that they themselves devise as something that is to be understood, if understood properly, as a proposition that consists of a disjunction of disjuncts each of which has a truth-value. I chose the mother-of the-bride example because the mother may want to dispute what the friend is saying by insisting that she has more control over what transpires than the friend seems willing to concede, and she may be right. By contrast, the law of excluded middle can only be understood to express a logical truth. The issue raised by the fact that is the philosopher who devises the truth is one we have already raised: how is something so devised to be understood to actually say anything?

The crucial role played by the philosopher in devising a proposition to illustrate or establish a certain point is evident when we reflect on how Fischer illustrates his claim that it is 'not unreasonable' to suppose that future contingents can be true:

> Imagine that Jill plays softball at t_2. It seems to follow that 'Jill will play softball at t_2' is true at t_1.[4]

Fischer, as the narrator, tells us of an event that has taken place, and then invites us to think of referring to that event before it has taken place. Since it did take place, the proposition that refers to it in the future tense must be true.

However, if we try to imagine actual talk of what Jill will do, then Fischer's reasoning is unsound. Suppose that Jill's mother asks the softball coach whether Jill will get to play this Thursday (or whether she will be benched because she has not been playing well). "Jill will not play this Thursday," he says. And when Jill's mother presses him about it, he may assure her that it is true, Jill won't play, and there is no reason to think that he is wrong. As it turns out, the player who was supposed to start in Jill's place gets sick, and Jill does start. So, that she will play, which is what the coach denied, does not follow from the fact that she did play. This result is not surprising, given our earlier discussion of cases where what will happen can be known and be true.

However, Fischer sees no need to imagine anyone to actually say that she (plays or) will play. So, he would object to my criticism of his reasoning. And although he is the one who introduces talk of what Jill will do, he does not think that that has any significance. He seems to assume that the event is there (even long before it has taken place); and, therefore, that something that is true or not true can be said about that event, whether before, while, or after the event has taken place, without having to imagine anyone to actually say it.

I question this assumption. I question whether there is such a thing as Jill playing softball, as Fischer's way of thinking seems to presuppose. When I think of saying it at the time it happens, I imagine Jill has stayed home from school because she is sick. So, Barry, her father, does not expect her to be playing. However, when he drives by the field on his way home from work, (he says to his passenger) that Jill is playing softball, something he finds troubling because she missed school that day due to illness. As far as his comment is concerned, that she is there at the field with (at least some of) her teammates is all that matters. As it happens, Barry's passenger responds by saying that Jill does not seem to be playing--her team is in the field, and she is sitting on the bench (in uniform). She means that Jill is not in the game, something that Barry was not talking about. And the coach may complain to Jill that she is not playing softball because her mind is elsewhere. (This is the kind of thing that coaches say). And someone who was interested in how Jill's team was faring in league competition, may be told that she is playing that afternoon, i.e., that he team is playing a game that counts in the standings.

When questioned about what the event of Jill playing softball is, no doubt Fischer will insist that it is possible to remove any ambiguity as to which or what event is being referred to. The problems I have been discussing just reappear when we ask ourselves whether there is such a thing as Jill playing softball rather than, for example, staying home sick. I say this because there seem to be a number of different ways what he says can be understood, if we try to imagine someone to be actually saying what Fischer is stipulating. Perhaps, the father would be pleased to see her daughter playing, but only if she actually gets into the game; perhaps, he would be angry to find that she is at the field at all, even if she won't play; perhaps, he is unclear about how he feels and is not even sure what he is saying when he asks whether it is true that she is playing. Each possibility

affects what he is saying; more significantly, how his audience responds and he responds to his audience will make clearer just what he is saying. Of course, we can add stipulations to cover such considerations, only to end up really talking about what is said in an actual conversation, however it might be disguised by the many stipulations we have made. So, the real issue raised by what Fischer is doing is whether the proposition he devises can be true or not true by somehow removing any ambiguity but without having to imagine someone actually saying anything.

It is his example, so Fischer can tell the story of Jill and softball any he wants, provided it is not understood as more than just a story, provided it is not used to make the kind of point that Fischer wants it to make. He is telling us that Jill played softball at a certain time; he is telling us that she will play softball at that time. It is not much of a story, though it might be effective if used humorously. However, that is not how Fischer wants it to be used. And for his purposes, it has to be more than just a story.

However, no philosopher would want omniscience to be understood as including among its objects the knowledge of the details of what is just a story. I say this because there is no conceivable way a conflict with free will could be generated from what happens in a story, if it is merely a story: nothing follows about our free will from the fact that the characters in a story lack it. To have philosophical significance, Fischer's story needs to be something we can imagine as actually transpiring.

Mind you, what Fischer devised may be referred to in order to say something, but then it is not the proposition that does the saying. As it happens, we are friends with a woman named Jill, and wonder what she is going to be doing next Thursday. She finds it amusing to answer by pointing to Fischer's essay and to the words that we have been discussing. However, it is not what Fischer devised that tells us what she will be doing, but her pointing to it when responding to our question. She is using the pointing to say what she is going to be doing, something that the proposition that Fischer devised does not do. So, this is not an example of how a proposition actually says something, let alone something that has a truth-value.

When it comes to the proposition, Fischer seems to be relying on the straight-line model of time and inviting us to locate the event--Jill's playing softball--at a certain

point, t_2 on that line. I have been questioning whether there is any such event, and in doing so questioning the straight-line model itself.

Moreover, the question arises as what someone is supposed to be doing in commenting on the presence of the event on the time-line before it actually transpires? The best I can do is to imagine that Barry is consulting a psychic, Madame Zorita, about his missing father. Zorita's response is to take note of something else. "Jill will play softball next Thursday." Such an example suggests itself to me because I am looking for a case where a person is somehow remarking on the presence of the event (on the time-line) when she says, "Jill will play softball at t_2." Of course, I know that Fischer has nothing like this in mind. However, I do not know what else to do to understand what Fischer's argument seems to require, namely, that the proposition in the future tense be a comment on the presence of the event at a later point in time. So, I can only suggest that Fischer himself is pointing to the event, telling us that it will be there. If I am right, then the real issue raised by his reasoning is a version of the issue raised earlier of how by devising or producing a proposition he can get it to actually say something.

The straight-line model of time also seems to be relied upon when we think of God as being outside of time. If we reject the model then there is nothing in terms of which God's situation with respect to time may be contrasted. Earlier we talked about how God could know what will happen to us by being outside the time frame of our lives, but this idea relies upon the assumption that there is a time frame inside of which our lives unfold. And it is this assumption that is being challenged when the straight-line model of time is questioned. This model to the contrary, there is no series of events that is somehow arrayed alone the time-line, past, present and future.

Omniscience, at least insofar as the future is concerned, cannot be defined in terms of the (knowledge of) truths—that is the conclusion that I have reached: whatever difficulties there may be in understanding what omniscience could be are only compounded when we try to understand what truths (concerning the future) could be. This conclusion should not be too surprising because instead of thinking about the concept of omniscience we seem to change the subject and end up talking about propositions and truths.

The equation of omniscience with knowing everything seems just as problematic as its equation with knowing all truths. That some people know everything is a familiar idea.

However, it is not a (universal) generalization, at least as logicians understand the concept; and it does not seem to be anything like omniscience. “She knows everything.” As said by a married man to his lover about his wife, or an embezzler to his companion in crime about his boss, the speaker is talking only of something that he does not want to be known, namely, the adulterous affair or crime. Here ‘everything’ refers to what, for example, the wife and lover are most concerned about the husband not knowing, including, perhaps, how long the affair has been going on, and what plans they have for continuing it. That his wife knows everything, that a co-worker knows of the details of plans for embezzlement, hardly suggests omniscience, and the fact that she knows implies nothing that might constitute a threat to free will. A being (or computer or wise lama) who knows all criminal or adulterous secrets seems to have access to amazingly resourceful and busy private detective agencies. Even so, however frightening the prospect of someone having such knowledge might be, it does not seem to amount to omniscience.

Sometimes a person is said to know everything (or to have encyclopedic knowledge) without any implication that he knows secrets, or, for that matter, that he is omniscient. Consider the case of Robert Silvers, the editor of the *New York Review of Books*. ‘Bob knows about everything.’ This observation from a *New York* (11-8-04) article, is supported by a quote from the historian, Tony Judt: ‘He (Silvers) could go from the obscurantist dialectics of some long forgotten seventies-era Marxist groupuscule to the niceties of modern Austrian politics.’ And, *New York* adds, Silvers’ knowledge was not confined to politics and literature, but included the latest theories of child rearing even though he had no children.

Silvers is being compared with his peers. If there are gaps in his knowledge of literature or politics, let alone science, popular culture or sports, that does not make Judt’s claim any less credible. Moreover, even when he knows a subject very well, Silvers may be unable to remember something he knows when asked about it on a particular occasion. That he knows everything hardly amounts to the claim that he knows any and every possible object of knowledge. Rather, the remarkable breadth and depth of his knowledge makes it right to say he knows everything.

Note that *New York* does not imply that Silvers is knowledgeable about the future, any more that it would have implied it by saying that he has encyclopedic knowledge.

Moreover, the fact that he knows so much hardly amount to his being omniscient (about the present or past): even though his knowledge is remarkable there is nothing mysterious or uncanny about it, as there would be, it would seem, if he were said to be omniscient.

There *is* something uncanny about authorial omniscience, which refers, among other things, to the author's telling us about the thoughts and feelings life of her characters; past, present and future events; and what happens in several places at the same time. Of course, the author is fallible and what she tells us about her characters might be in conflict with what she has them say or do. Even so, if anyone actually knows about other people, or even himself, the kinds of things the author tells us about her characters we would be quite amazed, if not skeptical.

It may seem tempting to think that what is familiar, authorial omniscience, is like what is unfamiliar, divine omniscience, in order to help explain the latter. The explanation requires that we think of ourselves as characters in a story or play written or composed by the omniscient (divine) being. And it seems that as characters in that story we are not free to deviate from what the story has us do. Sometimes we say that what has happened makes us *feel* like we are in a play or movie. But that is not the same thing as thinking that we really *are* only characters. Sometimes a real person may be a character in fiction, but what she is as a character is different from what she really is, no matter how believable the character is as the real person. And an actor may stay in character in real life, but even that is not the same thing as being only a character, which is not imaginable except as a symptom of madness.[5]

Some of my readers, especially those who think that there is more in heaven and earth than is dreamt of in natural theology, may want to refer to the Passion of Jesus, where the actions of several characters, most notable Judas Iscariot, Peter and Jesus himself, seem to be scripted. And they may even want to refer to everything we do as being scripted, especially if they think that everything is ordained by God. However, what God ordains should be distinguished from what is in a script or a story. Of course, the Passion is a story, but we are supposed to understand what God ordains to happen to really have happened.

Moreover, it is unclear what the fact that He has ordained our actions implies about our free will, unless we know what God did in ordaining them. Earlier we considered the

idea of 'fixing' things; if that is what God is doing to our actions, that must mean that He is doing what someone who somehow controls what we do, e.g., by drugs, would be doing. Such a view of divine ordainment does not seem to be very good theology, but without an answer to what God does in ordaining our actions, I do not see how a conflict with free will can be derived; and if that answer does enable us to derive it, the conflict does not come not from God's foreknowledge but from what He does in ordaining our behavior.

Even if knowing (about) everything or having authorial omniscience does not yield certain puzzling implications about free will when people are the ones who know, those implications do obtain when we are talking about God (or the omniscient being). This is an obvious rejoinder to the foregoing. But, how could we know this? Presumably, we have to rely on what we know about God's being omniscient, and that does not seem to be very much. After all, the Bible does not say that God is omniscient. That He is omniscient is a doctrine of theology or philosophy. And so, to understand what the attribution of omniscience to God (or any other being) implies we need to understand the thinking behind that attribution.

Although philosophers have what they think of as a sound theological basis for making the attributions that they do to God, their reasoning is problematic. Let me explain why I say this by citing what Fischer tells about the attribution of omniscience to God.

> An essential feature of the person who is God (if He exists) is that He is, for example omniscient; any actual or possible person who is not omniscient is not God.[6]

Note that Fischer refers to God, without a trace of irony, as a 'person', and tells us without any awareness of the presumption in his doing so, what this person must be if He is to be God. Anthony Kenny refers to omniscience as a 'divine attribute' and defines what it means to say that God exists by reference to this and other divine attributes.

> To say that God exists is to say that there is something that has the divine attributes.[7]

Kenny seems negligent in not helping us to imagine someone to be saying that God exists because it is unclear otherwise how he could know what saying it means, let alone that there is something that has the divine attributes, including omniscience.

How do philosophers or natural theologians, like Fischer or Kenny, know what God must be? Of course, they are relying on a long-standing theological tradition, to which almost everyone subscribes. And that tradition seems to rely on metaphysical it-stands-to-reason thinking according to which God must possess all the attributes that a perfect being, or one that which nothing greater can be conceived, would possess to an omni-degree.

But, why should we presume to understand what it is for the 'being' or 'person' that is God to be perfect (or great), let alone why being perfect (or great) is a good thing? I can understand a wife or child complaining that her husband or parent is *too* perfect or great. That is the problem with perfection or greatness. Perhaps it isn't a problem with God, although it is not clear how we could know such a thing. Why, then, suppose that that being is perfect at all?

If we think of God (or a being with the omni-attributes) as an ideal parent or judge, then it is not clear why we should think of perfection or greatness as important, let alone essential to the fulfillment of that function. What is important is that parents love their children, and are committed to parenting, that they really care for the welfare of their children and learn how to provide for them. Presumably, it is important for them to follow through on what they say they will do, and to try to be fair when more than one child is involved or when rewards or punishments are being dispensed. However, they would not be criticized merely because they cannot 'see' into the future, let alone really see it as it is happening long before it actually happens. And I wonder why should we care enough about the being described as having such 'divine attributes' to want to be in a relationship with Him.

But what about God's providence or (final) judgement? "God knows everything you have done." Parents tell their kids this in order to instill in them a fear of God's punishment. And that God knows everything we will do or everything that will happen is supposed to be critical as far as His taking care of us in concerned, however we understand what that knowledge involves. However, I don't see why saying that God is

provident implies anything about His knowledge of the future; why does His looking after us require or presuppose that He knows what is going to happen, when all that needs to be supposed is that He will manage to take care of us?

There is a comparable problem with God's rewards and punishments. At issue is whether knowledge must be attributed to him in order for him to punish us when we are guilty or to reward us when we really have behaved righteously, if that is what He does. That He behaves justly requires only that when we are punished or rewarded by Him we really deserve it. The further implication that He must know what we have done is what I am questioning. I concede that the implication seems obvious; even so, I think that it is problematic. What I am questioning is the idea that we can infer from the fact that God is looking after us that He must *know* what we have done.

When theologians say things as religious counselors, and, e.g., attribute omniscience (and other omni-qualities) to God, what they are saying may be accepted or rejected based on its spiritual or pastoral value. For example, Maimonides and others wanted to correct what they saw as an idolatrous or corrupt relationship with God, where the believer is in the relationship because of what she can get out of it. Presumably, by preaching that God is unlike a human being, something that can be emphasized by attributing omniscience to Him (or by condemning thinking of God in anthropomorphic terms), the believer will come to have an unconditionalized relationship with God (and, perhaps, with other people).

Of course, such an explanation of the attribution makes it vulnerable to questions about whether this message may be better communicated in other ways. Given that God is omniscient, why would a believer be inclined to worship God unconditionally, especially if, as I have been arguing, it is quite unclear what omniscience involves? And, if it were possible for us to love some people unconditionally, then wouldn't it be more likely for us to worship God unconditionally if we conceived of Him as not being entirely unlike us? That is to say, by making the attribution of omniscience to God conditional on the effectiveness of this pastoral approach, the attribution itself seems to be more rather than less problematic.

To know what God's attributes are we may want to look at how Scripture seems to conceive of Him, perhaps as a corrective or complement to natural theology. In another

paper, I am going to be considering controversies over how God's omniscience is conceived where there is an emphasis on showing how a given position is supported or undermined by certain Biblical passages. For our present purposes, it should suffice to identify some of the problems with this practice. The passages in question do not say that God is omniscient. Rather, they say that God knows something; or they offer prophecies (or boast about the superiority of divinely inspired prophecies). The issue raised by these references to Scripture is how we can derive from them a conception of omniscience, especially as applied to the future.

Consider how questionable it is for commentators on (the first eighteen verses of) Psalm 139 to read it as, "An exquisitely detailed and poetic description of divine omniscience."[8] A key verse that many commentators cite in connection with this omniscient theme is the fourth one:

> Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.[9]

The psalmist, because he is referring to the composition of the poem itself, does not seem to be about the relationship of other poets or people to God. He is talking about how close *he* is to God, so close that God can anticipate the words of the poem, as a woman can anticipate what her long-time partner is going to say. But, he does not seem to be telling us anything about God that is to be understood independently of *his* relationship to Him. So, it is difficult to see how to obtain, by generalization, the attribution of omniscience to God, unless, of course, the generalization is based on the assumption that God is omniscient.

Not only is there a similar problem with Biblical prophecies (that are fulfilled), but there also is a problem with characterizing the prophecies in terms of knowledge. Even when they are not contingent on whether the audience for the prophecies heed the prophet's warning or plea, the prophecies seem confined to developments of great importance or significance to that audience, whereas the developments that interest philosophers often are insignificant and trivial (presumably, because that would make them hard to accurately predict), and are about specific events that are to occur at a certain time and date. Most significant of all is the fact that the prophecies, such as those in Isaiah 41-8 concerning the triumph of Cyrus of Persia over Babylon, although they

refer to what God 'foretells' they are not stated in the form of claims about what the prophet (or God) *knows* what will happen.

An obvious reaction is to insist that since the prophecy came true, God, who inspired it, must have known what would happen; and so must know everything that will happen. This reaction seems especially apt in connection with the some of the things Jesus said were going to happen. For example, although Jesus does not say that he *knows* what Peter will do that night, he cites a prophecy from Zecharia, 13.7--"'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered"--and, goes on to tell the disciples that they will all be "deserters because of me" (Matthew 26.31). Then when Peter protests, Jesus replies very forcefully, "Truly, I tell you, this very night before the cock crows, you will deny me three times" (Matthew 26.34). And, as the text makes clear, what Jesus prophesies does come true; Peter denies that he is with Jesus exactly three times. So, Jesus must have known, and since it seems so uncanny that he knew it, Jesus must be omniscient (if the passage is to be cited as evidence of his omniscience).

This reasoning is problematic. Granted that, however predictable it might have been that Peter would be confused by Jesus' arrest, it was amazing that Peter did exactly what Jesus said he would do. What is suspect is the inference from its being amazing to the claim that Jesus *knew* that Peter.

How are we to understand saying that Jesus knew? Let us imagine Jesus to say to Peter, "I know you are going to deny me three times this night." This change seems to put the emphasis on Jesus' knowing, which suggests that we should imagine Jesus to be saying, "You can't fool me. I know." But, Peter is not trying to fool him; Peter has no plans to deny Jesus. Nor is Jesus trying to encourage Peter, as we do we tell someone, "I know you can do it." Nor is Jesus talking about a premonition or feeling. So, why would he say to Peter that he *knows* what he will do, which is not what he says to him, rather than foretell what he will do, which is what he does do?

And what about saying that the omniscient being or God knows? Although Jesus is a person, we do not seem to know enough about what it is to be Jesus to know how to draw conclusions from what he says or does about what he really knows. The problem is even more serious when it comes to the omniscient being. How is he supposed to show in his life that he knows (believes, thinks, anticipates, etc.)? I know that all that interests

philosophers is the output—the propositions that a computer, wise man or omniscient being somehow produces. The question I am raising is how we are supposed to derive from the existence of this output any conclusions about what the device producing the output knows (or does not know), or even that it knows. If anything, talk of God as knowing, e.g., that Cain has slain Abel, seems easier because Scripture seems to show us by what God does, namely, reward or punish, that He knows. However, I am uncomfortable attributing knowledge to Him in other contexts, especially where this rather simplistic conception of God as supplying payoffs is not adopted.

Here we seem to have another variation of the theme we have been developing in this paper, the theme of what might be called the creation of meaning. If it is the philosopher or (natural) theologian who is saying that the omniscient being or God knows then how do her words actually get to say anything? I think of this as a variation of the theme that I have been sounding, the theme that was most dramatically sounded with the introduction of propositions.

Suppose that we consider the prophecies (or predictions) of an omniscient being without attributing knowledge to it. It would seem that a conflict between omniscience and free will can be derived when we think of such prophecies as necessarily and always coming true (or being fulfilled). Since any such prophecy must come true, there is nothing the subject of the prophecy can do about it, nothing to bring it about that the prophecy does not come true. So, she lacks free will.

Note that with this suggestion we seem to be confined to the prophecies that, like the Delphic oracle, it actually makes. When omniscience is defined in terms of what the omniscient being knows, then there would seem to be no obvious limits to that knowledge; whereas, by confining ourselves to what it actually says we open ourselves to questions that do not arise otherwise. When and where are these prophecies supposed to be made, and to whom? And if no audience is required, then are they prophecies at all?

Moreover, prophecies seem to be very different from what philosophers have in mind when they try to illustrate the problem of divine omniscience and free will. An obvious difference is that they do not have the specificity that philosophers have in mind; they do not say that something very specific will happen at a certain time and date; and prophecies are about significant political, religious, economic or social developments,

whereas philosophers prefer to talk about something insignificant and unremarkable, something that is not a development but an actual event.

There is another problem that arises when a prophecy is actually made that has to do with understanding the idea that it must come true. The problem is that, invariably, there is an ambiguity built into the prophecy that makes it unclear, at least in advance, what would count as fulfilling it. Mind you, when, as philosophers, we talk about a prophecy that must be fulfilled, we are in the same position that Fischer was when he talked about the proposition about Jill playing softball. We can *say* that it was fulfilled, and, saying it makes it so, provided we are understood to be merely telling a story. However, it does not follow that there are not all sorts of ambiguities when it comes to an actual prophecy, and I am prepared to argue that that is in the nature of a prophecy.

This point is especially obvious when it comes to what Jesus said to Peter. Does the prophecy Jesus cites about the scattering of the sheep after the striking of the shepherd apply to the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus? After the fact, after his disciples fail him in various ways, perhaps we can see what they did as being referred to in the prophecy, if we are so inclined. But, there does not seem to be a canonical way to understand the prophecy *before* we know what actually happened. And a similar point applies to Jesus saying that Peter will deny him three times during the night. What counts as denial? What counts as a distinct time? If we were on the scene following Peter that night, then we may want to count other things he did as denials of Jesus; or, perhaps, we may decide that one of the cited denials does not really count. So, there does not seem to be a basis for concluding that Peter could not have done differently than he did, unless what Jesus prophesied could be understood to what Peter will do at a specific time, and, of course, there is nothing to suggest that that is possible. That is what is so distinctive about prophecy—there is so much room for an interpretation that reveals it to have been fulfilled.

That there is something that is the fulfillment of the prophecy seems to be no different from the assumption that there is such a thing as Jill playing softball. In fact, we can use the Jill example to illustrate the point we are making here as it applies to a prediction. “I predict that Jill will be playing softball this afternoon,” I say after I get to work and tell a co-worker that Jill has stayed home sick. As it happens, she is at the game but is too sick

to play. Was I right? I am not sure how we can say. However, if I am omniscient, then presumably I must be right. So, if we need my perfect record of predictions to be intact then we may rule that I was right. However, this only reinforces my point that there is considerable leeway in how the prediction (or prophecy) is understood to have come true.

And why suppose that what the omniscient being says is a prophecy or a prediction? The being says that I will mow my yard on a certain day and time in June five years from now. Is it warning someone, or promising something? Is it trying to provide some guidance, perhaps about doing the will of God? Such questions seem misconceived; the very idea that the being is doing something in saying what he does seems wrong. And what it is saying need not be understood as a prophecy, prediction or anything that it would be understood as being if a person said it. All that matters is that the omniscient being said what it did, and that what it said had to come true. If so, then there is nothing I can do to prevent the prophecy from coming true, and so I cannot do otherwise than mow the lawn that day. So, I must lack free will.

However, the assumption that the omniscient being is saying that something will happen, but that otherwise we are not to try to understand what saying it involves, is a variant of the same assumption that we criticized earlier when we objected to the idea that the truths the omniscient being knows are propositions. Since propositions are not the kinds of things that do or do not come true, presumably, the things the being says are not propositions. Even so, the idea that there are such things is objectionable for the same reason that we said propositions are objectionable, namely, that idea presumes that those who devise or refer to them as something the omniscient being is saying can somehow get them to say something.

So, the real problem with the reasoning that purport to derive problematic inferences from the existence of an (infallibly) omniscient being is with the idea that a philosopher can do something miraculous, namely, transform something he devises into something that actually says something; or, as a variation on this theme, the problem is with the idea that he can talk about saying something that must come true without bothering to concern himself with how that would apply to an actual situation. “Let it say something,” he is commanding. And, he assumes, that, like God when He created the world, that is all it takes for it to be so, for it to say something.

At the beginning I said that this paper would explain why the title is funny. I had originally titled it "God knows" because by saying this about when my book on natural theology will be completed I would not really be saying anything about God. I liked that title because I wanted to raise the question of how we could say something that really is about Him (independently of engaging in a religious activity). However, I decided that I did not want this paper to be about God (or about talking about God), but about omniscience. Moreover, many philosophers prefer to work with the conception of an omniscient being (rather than God) when they discuss the problem of the conflict of divine omniscience and free will. Hence, the new title. However, I would silly to say that "The omniscient being knows" is another way of saying that I have no idea when the book will be done. The joke in using this title is the suggestion that the omniscient being does know it, when I am implying that it can't be known. However, the paper has a serious purpose that is reflected in my use of the title, namely, to raise the question of how we could understand, let alone know, what the omniscient being knows.

Now that I am concluding the paper, I wonder whether a different title might be more appropriate, one that emphasizes the role of the philosopher that I have been calling into question. I have been suggesting that philosophers not only want to avoid any reference to the God of revelation by talking about the omniscient being, but that they seem to want to displace God by taking over at least some of His functions. I am thinking, in particular, of how they engage in an activity that seems constitutive of doing philosophy, namely, the activity of creating meaning. They presume to have created it when they devise what they call 'propositions', when they attribute knowledge to God, and when they refer to something that is said about what will happen that must come true. Perhaps, their presuming to be God-like is not surprising when it comes to the very practice of natural theology. Earlier I said that there was something presumptuous about dictating to God what He must be. Now I want to suggest that making attributions to God (independently of a relationship with Him or as part of religious observance) seems to be an expression of the desire to be God.

Notes

[1] Anthony Kenny *The God of the Philosophers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 3.

[2] John Fischer *God, Foreknowledge, and Freedom* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 1989), p. 1.

[3] I owe this point to Frank Ebersole 'Was the sea-battle rigged?' in *Things We Know* (Xlibris, 2001), pp. 238-65. I also have been influenced by what his essay has to say about the law of excluded middle.

[4] Fischer, *op. cit*., p. 27.

[5] In the movie 'Stranger than Fiction', Harold Crick hears the author talk about what will happen to Harold in his story, and Harold comes to believe that he is that character. However, the movie *is* fiction. Harold may be superstitious enough to believe that what the character does he somehow will end up doing. However, he can't take the idea seriously that he is only a character in a story unless he is insane.

[6] Fischer, *op. cit*., p. 3.

[7] Kenny, op. cit., p. 5.

[8] *The Jewish Study Bible*, Oxford University Press 2004, p. 1436. The commentators on this psalm are Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler.

[9] This translation is from the *New Revised Standard Version*, which I am using for my quotations from the Bible. This translation seems to lend itself better to the interpretation of the verse as being about divine omniscience, whereas the *JPS* translation of this verse seems even better for my reading: 'There is not a word on my tongue but that You, O LORD, know it well.'